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ABSTRACT

Research seems to indicate that grade retention of students may benefit students academically. However, other studies suggest that grade retention does not improve the achievement of problem students, does not ensure significant gains in achievement, affects boys twice as often as girls, and occurs frequently for children with learning, behavior and health problems. Traits associated with the retained student are low confidence level; poor language development; inadequate social foundations; and first language other than English. Most students retained view retention as a personal failure, not as a way to achieve. Grade retention tends to be most beneficial for students who are low achievers and immature. The use of retention and its effect on student achievement remains controversial. Research findings are inconclusive regarding retention, nor does current research support grade retention as a means of raising student achievement. (RH)

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WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT GRADE RETENTION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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The subject of grade retention is a controversial issue among educators and educational researchers. Grade retention has been of great concern beginning in the early 1800's. Educators began to realize that all students do not achieve at the same level or rate and had great concerns about passing them on to the next grade level. Years ago, students were retained as a result of failure to achieve the expectations of a particular grade level. Individual differences were ignored and little was understood about learning problems. Today, grade retention is known as repeating, flunking, non-promotion or "a year to grow". A student that is required to repeat an entire school year in the same grade is allowed an added opportunity for success and achievement. Over the past fifty years, retention has decreased substantially due to its overuse and much controversy in research. Educators and administrators are beginning to find necessary alternatives to grade retention and its effect on student achievement.

Research seems to indicate that student retention may benefit students' academically (Kerzner 1978). It appears to be most beneficial in the primary grades. It may bring about significant gains of achievement at the fourth and fifth grade levels. Kerzner also suggested that retention for remedial or slower learner is the best option. Children who are retained in the first, second or third grade will achieve and will gain the overall benefits as compared to those retained in the later grades. Frazier (1978) indicates that grade retention may be justified in the case of a child that has been absent a great deal or for the very immature child.

The Gessell Institute has researched the attitudes and theories towards the emotional reaction of a retained student. The Institute also counsels parents to accept and support the idea that their child needs to be emotionally and physically ready before he or she can succeed and achieve in school. Retention can be beneficial to children who are prepared properly.

The Tennessee Study (1970) funded a compulsory kindergarten in its public schools. This introduced a unique study concerning alternatives to retention. Researchers compared kindergarten achievement with those students who did not attend kindergarten. The purpose of this study was to discover whether or not kindergarten experiences directly influenced achievement in the later grades. The Basic Skills Test was administered to students in grades five through eight to demonstrate whether achievement of pupils with a kindergarten background is superior to those with a non-kindergarten background. There appeared to be a reduction of the psychological effect of retained students.

The Gates Promotional Program (1980) was initiated by the New York City School System to provide an alternative to grade retention. The purpose of this program was to raise student achievement levels and lower the chances of grade retention. The Gates Achievement Test was administered to regular education students, special education students and limited English proficient students. The evaluation of this program consisted of comparing the results of the students who were administered The Gates Achievement Test. The findings of this study concluded that all students involved in this program made significant gains of achievement lowering the chances of grade retention.

Light (1977) developed and designed a retention scale to assist school personnel when considering grade retention for a child. The instrument measures nineteen factors that influence retention. Light's Retention Scale has great utility as a counseling device measuring such items as intelligence, physical size, attendance, attitude and motivation in relationship to grade retention.

Watson (1979) evaluated Light's Retention Scale to see if it was related to the achievement of one hundred twenty three students in first grade who were retained. Watson found Light's Retention Scale to be unreliable and had little concurrent validity if used alone to assess the ability of retained students. He concluded Light's Scale should not be used alone as a single evaluation. The validity and reliability of this scale has merit when used with achievement, IQ, visual-motor, self-concept and physical maturity tests.

Research suggests grade retention does not improve the achievement of problem students. Bocks (1977) and Walker (1973) concluded that the majority of students retained neither learn more nor learn better the second time around. In fact, they may achieve less. Their findings indicated that retained students do not appear to expected grade level norms.

Jackson (1975) studied student achievement over a six month period. He found no differences in the academic achievement of those students retained and those students who were promoted. Koons' (1977) supported Jackson's findings. He concluded that although some students may benefit from retention but for every student who does benefit, there are two or more who do not benefit.

Miller, Fraizer and Richey (1980) found the practice of retention is excessive. The main reason for retention is lack of subject mastery and achievement. Retention causes failure and lowers the students self-concept. They also concluded that teachers' attitudes and awareness of retention does not promote the use of retention. Most teachers feel that retention does not promote subject mastery or greater means of achievement.

According to Stringer (1981) students believe that they deserve to be retained. Most students view retention negatively and ignore their accomplishments after being retained. These negative attitudes affect their academic progress.

Brown (1981) carefully planned and implemented eight action-steps for grade retention. These action-steps were correlated with a suggested timetable of action-school months.

1. Observe the child's progress and document (months one and two).
2. Determine if the child is performing at or below grade level (months two and four).
3. Inform parents honestly and specifically (months two and four).
4. Consult with pupil personnel team and obtain a group assessment of the child's performance (months two and four).
5. Conduct a parent conference (months two and four).
6. Follow through on recommendations and continue to observe the child's performance (months two and six).
7. Repeat steps one through six (months two and eight).
8. Review all information and make recommendations (month eight).

Bossing (1981) believed that retention harms the student more than it helps him. Opponents of retention argue that students who are retained achieve less than those who were promoted. There also tends to be a positive correlation between nonpromotion and high school dropout rates.

Boys suffer from retention twice as often as girls. Grade retention occurs more often for children with learning, emotional and health problems. Findings of this study suggest that retention does not ensure achievement. Holmes and Matther (1984) also examined the impact of promotion and retention on achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept and attitudes towards school. They found that students who were promoted fared better than those who were retained.

The use of grade retention does not ensure significant gains of achievement. Grade retention occurs frequently for children with learning, behavior and health problems. Boys suffer from retention twice as often as girls do. Traits associated with the retained student are: low confidence levels, poor language development, inadequate social foundations and non-English speaking students. Most students retained do not view retention as a way to achieve, instead they view it as a personal failure. Grade retention tends to be most beneficial for those students who are low achievers and immature. The use of retention and its effect on student achievement still remains a controversial issue. Research findings are inconclusive regarding retention, nor does current research support grade retention as a means of raising student achievement.

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